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Bill on Agent Identities Advances

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WASHINGTON, June 24 — A Senate subcommittee today approved a bill that would make it a crime to publish the identities of covert agents of United States intelligence agencies, even if such identities were deduced from nonsecret documents or had been public knowledge.

More than 100 professors at university law schools around the country have signed a letter, made public today by organizations opposed to the legislation, expressing a belief that the bill would violate the First Amendment protection of freedom of speech and of the press.

The bill was favorably reported by the Subcommittee on Security and Terrorism of the Senate Judiciary Committee under a procedure called "polling out a bill." Under this process, the subcommittee members do not meet but instead express their votes in signed letters.

All three Republican members of the subcommittee supported the "agents' identities bill." They were Jeremiah A. Denton of Alabama, the chairman; John P. East of North Carolina and Orrin G. Hatch of Utah. One Democrat, Joseph R. Biden of Delaware, voted against the bill and Patrick J. Leahy of Vermont abstained.

Similar legislation is pending in the House.

Such bills did not pass Congress last year when they became buried in an avalanche of last-minute business, but they are believed to have very strong support now.

Senator Biden plans to offer one or more amendments to the Senate bill when it is considered and voted on by the full Judiciary Committee, which has 18 members.

The legislation has aroused considerable protest, particularly among civil liberties advocates and journalists who believe it would inhibit the reporting of abuses and illegal actions by intelligence agencies.

It is conceivable, for instance, that if such legislation were law now it might have set off prosecution for the publication of two recent articles in The New York Times Magazine about assistance given to Libyan terrorist operations by former C.I.A. officers. The articles mentioned the names of corporations that had furnished special electronics and demolition equipment to the agency, and which were thus "sources of operational assistance" to the agency. Such sources are defined as "covert agents" in the bills.

Last year 60 law professors signed a statement saying they believed the legislation to be unconstitutional.